

# A Brief Overview of From Wisdom Related Knowledge to Wise Acts: Refashioning the Conception of Wisdom to Improve our Chances of Becoming Wiser

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This brief overview is intended to accompany the interview with Jonathan Rowson also in this special issue of *Integral Review*. Written in 2008, Jonathan's dissertation provides an example of observing an integral mind at work. Reading through the it one cannot help but be aware of the easy, flowing nature of how Jonathan's mind is able to integrate a wide range of fields of inquiry, models, positions within academic and societal relevance and discourse while somehow making it easy to read.

The dissertation begins with a very personal introduction on why the topic of wisdom and how it is important to become part of the problem in order to become part of the solution. This is a counterintuitive phrase he attributes to Bill Torbert and it equates to the notion that unless you have a lived experience of a certain kind of challenge, and participate in the world, it's very challenging to understand how the problems, as Kegan and Lahey say, can 'solve us.' In that sense Jonathan approaches the topic of wisdom as a personal problem of learning to become wiser as well as understanding the social and political needs for wisdom in society today.

The dissertation is divided into four parts making up ten chapters. The first part is looking at wisdom research itself. It begins with a traditional literature review which takes us through an array of works by researchers from the major schools of thought as well as outside them in the field of wisdom literature. From this review you see a number of themes beginning to appear. There is something of a relationship between spiritual intelligence and needs and wisdom. There is something to do with this notion from Francisco Varela of the virtuality of self that is somehow related to wisdom. There's a distinction made between wisdom as a general personality characteristic and the notion of wise acting.

Our relationship to wisdom is also linked to the notion of catching ourselves in the act of self-deception. In this way, Jonathan positions wisdom as a form of transformative learning, a theme he comes back to a number of times. In reviewing this array of literature and research on wisdom

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he perceives that the main challenge is that wisdom is a premodern idea relying on the tools of modernity to fit a postmodern world.

It is this kind of challenge of wisdom as a concept or phenomenon that in some ways we can all recognize when we see it, or at least have a felt sense of recognition and resonance for it, and yet it's almost impossible to define. In fact, later on Jonathan says that to define wisdom is unwise.

The second chapter looks at the problem of why it's so difficult to approach the word wisdom in a wise way, and that this notion of indefinitely defining wisdom is in itself problematic. To deal with this Jonathan looks at wisdom as a finite province of meaning, as a meme and even as a koan. This approach of trying to understand why it is so challenging to define or even discuss wisdom is the nub of this chapter. We encounter the reality of this challenge in that the very act of naming and positioning this difficulty is to step to the margins of what is considered appropriate for doing an academic intellectual project in relation to something that doesn't really fit in that modality.

In the third chapter Jonathan moves into a description of how he did his research. While not what one would consider a traditional methodology chapter, it does serve this function as he describes the first, second and third person notions of awareness, appreciation and appraisal that he utilized in this work. It's very clear that there is a strong heuristic orientation of observing his mind at work in relation to the topic. To illustrate this he uses a story from his time as a chess player (where he was three years in a row the British Chess Champion). He utilized his ability to observe the different phenomena arising in his mind as a metacognitive way of helping him understand possible distractions and/or blind alleys of thinking that can arise during a chess match. Applying this kind of metacognitive functioning to his own process of research is what gives this dissertation a light readable quality, where we feel we're going on this personal journey with Jonathan.

The second person part of the research constituted utilizing a number of stories that were considered to be descriptive of wisdom or wise acts in some form or another and to use those as a dialogue piece to have a number of other respondents read and give responses to whether or not they considered the stories exemplars of wisdom and, if so or if not, why or why not? This second person part of the research appears here and there throughout the dissertation but there is no traditional empirical findings section in relation to this. As well, the third person appraisal has a lot to do with taking a meta-theoretical approach to the existing theories and research around wisdom.

In part two, positioning wisdom, Jonathan addresses some of the challenges he faced in applying this approach to the topic. The first is talking about getting beyond a rationalistic neurosis in research. This involved describing the notion of bricolage as a general kind of meta-theoretical handyman approach to weaving through not only the landscape of wisdom literature, but also the philosophical and psychological issues involved in wisdom research.

He then takes a look in chapter five at human nature as bodies, brains and breakdowns and talks about embodied empathy and wisdom as transformation. Chapter six, *knowledge about*

*wisdom requires wisdom about knowledge*, gets into the epistemological challenges that face doing this work and recognizes that knowledge is active and not just representational. Essentially this entails a need to stand back from and be as conscious and explicit as possible about the lenses and perspectives one is bringing into the work and how they create the particular perceptions available. In this there was an interesting relation to the work of Watzlawick, who talks about taking total responsibility in our lives, total personal responsibility, and how this action actually leads to total freedom. This was a very interesting chapter looking at epistemology and knowledge in relation to doing wisdom research.

Part three looks at a deeper understanding of wisdom, or at least moving towards it and in chapter seven unpacks the notion of transformative learning as the essence of wisdom. Jonathan sees wisdom as a confluence of experience, perspective and transformation. In this way he comes to the concept from Varela of the virtuality of self. He recognizes that as we go through transformative processes what we were once subject to or embedded in as an identity shifts to an object of reflection that we are no longer identified with. From this we start to see that the notion of self is actually much more fluid than we imagined; that change is natural in humans. From this he notices how Varela moves towards this notion of a virtuality of self, not as self being unreal, but as the self not being the ontological grounding of reality we often take it to be.

Chapter eight then builds on this and talks about seeing through the self; from being a self to having a self. This is captured by the notion that each of us as a self is a theory, or “each of us are a theory which is a self.” Somehow we ‘self spin’ imaginative events and create all sorts of distractions and dead ends for ourselves. The notion of expertise as knowledge is translated into first person experience of the virtuality of self and the transformative effect this is able to have on us.

Part four is about the challenge of becoming wiser. The first three parts lay out the field of wisdom and its research, what it is, where it is situated and why it is important. Part four looks at what is the path towards gaining wisdom? This is what Jonathan problematizes as the main challenge in the existing research on wisdom, that while it does a lot of descriptive work it does not do so much to try and explain to us how to move on a path towards becoming wiser.

To redress this, he draws on a number of pieces of work to look at some very specific issues related to what he calls the “psycho social battleground of wisdom” in chapter nine. These have to do with; the biological divisions we have constructed between mind and body, a notion of naïve realism that we already see things as they are and should be, and the notion of self-deception which we touched on earlier and is a very strong component of what seems to be a natural blockage on the road to wisdom. As well, the notion of a self-serving bias, that we already see our own change much more than we see it in others, as well as a negativity bias, group think and status anxiety are included in the list of issues Jonathan puts forward as impediments on the path to wisdom. In this sense, there are implications for pedagogy which are explored in the conclusion, with a sense of the importance of dissonance in cultivating wisdom as a step in the process of transformative learning.

Overall, this meta-theoretical heuristic journey through the landscape of literature, stories (third person as well as personal ones) and reflections on wisdom makes for very enjoyable

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reading. In my experience, after having been exposed to a lot of the literature reviewed on wisdom from earlier work, it is clear to me that the approach that Jonathan has taken enables the field of wisdom research to have a perspective on itself. There are new insights about wisdom, that in essence it is a transformative process about cultivating a sense of detachment from our identification as a self, realizing the virtuality of that self and yet utilizing the self in creating and cultivating the kind of habits of mind that will lead to spontaneous wise acts in the world.